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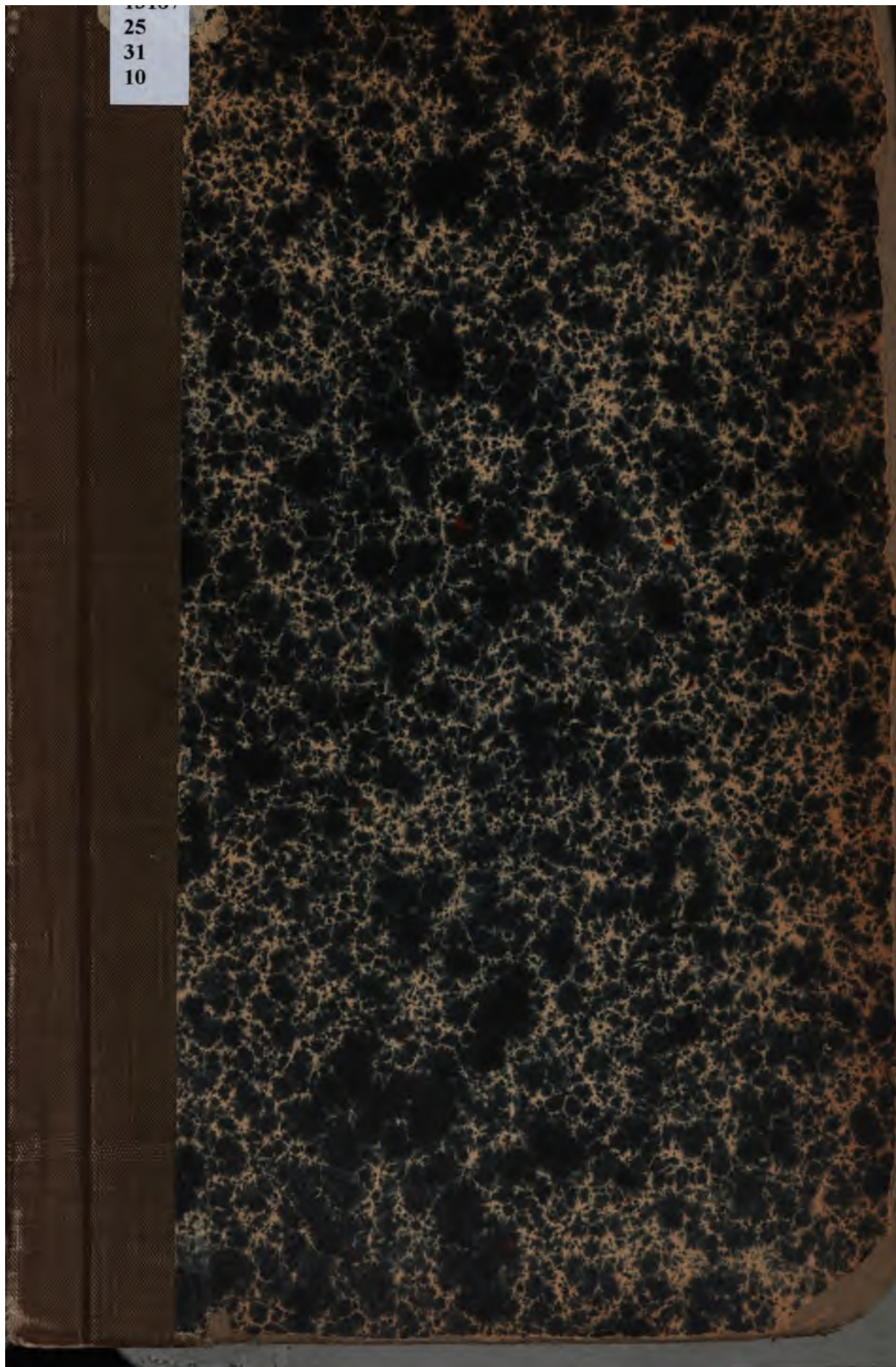
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FROM

Prof. Roland B. Thaxter,  
Cambridge.





A  
DISCOURSE

ON  
THE DUTY OF SUSTAINING THE LAWS,

OCCASIONED BY THE  
BURNING OF THE URSULINE CONVENT.

DELIVERED AT THE  
FIRST CHURCH IN MEDFORD,

SUNDAY, AUGUST 24, 1834.

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BY CALEB STETSON.

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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BOSTON:  
HILLIARD, GRAY, AND COMPANY.  
1834.

MS 13187.25.31.10



Prof. Roland B. Thaxter,  
Cambridge.

J. D. FREEMAN, PRINTER, WASHINGTON STREET.

## S E R M O N .

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### I PETER, II. 13—16.

Submit yourselves unto every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake ; whether it be to the king, as supreme, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God ; that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men ; as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as servants of God.

The Christian religion has a remarkable adaptation to the wants of man under every kind of political organization. It does not intermeddle with existing forms of government. It recognises the claims of all, and aims to promote human happiness under all. It teaches at once, liberty and subordination. It reconciles the greatest good of the individual with the greatest good of the community—the highest desirable degree of private freedom, with the most profound obedience to public law. Its principles are adapted to give the most ample protection to all personal rights ; while they reconcile men to those gentle restraints, which are necessary for the quiet and happiness of the whole social body. If rulers and people are under its influence, “the ordinances of man” are regarded as expressions of the Divine will. Under this peaceful reign of good principles, the laws of the land are obeyed as ap-



pointments of God. And they are willingly obeyed; for they impose no restraint upon good men—they are a terror to evil doers only—men “who use their liberty as a cloak for maliciousness, not as servants of God.”

The “servants of God” then are free men—and the only free men; for they desire nothing which the laws forbid—their wishes being in subjection to right principles, they feel no outward restraint—they need none—to them laws are necessary only to define and protect their rights. But under all governments the freedom of bad men must be controlled; for wickedness unchecked by principle or by law, would be utterly incompatible with the safety, the peace, or even the existence of society.

The early disciples of Christianity lived under the stern despotism of a Roman emperor and his subordinate ministers of oppression. To such a government they could not be attached by sentiments of loyalty or patriotism; all their national feelings were against it. They were conquered people. They were under the military domination of foreigners, and of course had as good a right, as men can have, to resist established authority. Yet our Savior and his apostles carefully inculcated upon them submission to “the powers that be.”

We are not, however, to understand them as teaching slavish sentiments, or sanctioning despotic government: but as long as men are actually subjects of such a government, it is clearly their duty “to live as quiet and peaceable subjects, in all godliness and honesty.” Christianity does not say—nor would I intimate—that a nation is bound to submit forever to bad government. Let them throw it

off—if they can—as our fathers did. But a wide distinction is to be made between revolution and insubordination to existing laws. It is one thing for a great people to rise in the majesty of their united strength to assert their rights, and quite another thing to commit acts of lawless violence, which have no revolution for their object.

If such as I have stated were the lessons of Divine wisdom to men who were groaning under an iron bondage, how much more emphatically may they be addressed to us, who live under a mild government of our own choosing! If the early Christians were commanded to “render unto Cæsar the things which were Cæsar’s,” how much stronger is our obligation to render to the laws, which protect our rights and our persons, the obedience which they demand?

All human governments may be resolved into *two kinds*, which are radically different from each other. *The government of will and the government of law.*

A government of human will—whether it resides in one or many—is a despotism. It is not the empire of reason, but of force. The character of a government is not determined by the name it bears. We have seen the death-like quiet of a great nation, under the arbitrary will of a single monarch; and we have seen the same nation, under republican institutions, visited with tenfold horrors, by the sanguinary violence of lawless and ferocious multitudes. By whatever name you call the organs of power, that people only are free, or can be free, whose individual rights are secured by wise and equal laws—laws I mean, which derive authority and permanence from the spirit and character of the nation. The institutions and laws of such a people are the expression of

its universal mind—of its collected wisdom—they address the common reason—they derive their benignant power from an enlightened public opinion, which summons to their support all the friends of social order, peace, and virtue, and renders an appeal to force unnecessary. If the people have not virtue enough to obey the laws, nor the government power enough to enforce them—anarchy and riot must ensue—the deep foundations of the social fabric are broken up. No security can be found from the unbridled *will* of the many, who are driven by furious passions or unhappy delusions, into deeds of violence and outrage. I repeat that a government of will—whether administered by one or many—is essentially a despotism. A democracy *may be* immeasurably more oppressive than the domination of any single tyrant, inasmuch as the countenance and sympathy of numbers combined in wrong, takes away the feeling of responsibility and the restraining force of public sentiment. There is no tyranny so fearful—so ominous to human rights and happiness, as the will of an ill-informed, unreflecting, wrong-headed majority. Under such circumstances, it is not the wisdom of the nation expressed by its constitution and laws, but the folly, madness, wickedness of the nation, that bears sway. When such a consummation as this arrives, the destiny of a people is soon sealed. Suffering humanity, harassed by injustice—perplexed by change—is driven to seek, under the dominion of a single will, a refuge from the intolerable oppressions of a multitude of tyrants, who acknowledge no law but their own capricious and headlong impulses.

It cannot be disguised that we “have fallen upon evil tongues and evil times.” Who can predict what

tomorrow may bring forth ? There is a stern and angry questioning of principles which have been held sacred for centuries. Old establishments are breaking loose from their strong foundations in public affection. The common respect for what is permanent and venerable is giving way to an alarming extent. The influence of great and good men is despised and rejected. The whole bosom of the community is heaving with profound and unwonted agitation. The incoming tides and currents of opinion are rushing with restless violence from their time-worn channels ; and who can calculate their direction or their force ?

The riotous destruction of churches and dwelling-houses in some of our large cities, and a similar act of outrage in our immediate neighborhood, are the more alarming, because they are to be regarded as nothing more than partial outbreakings of this unquiet spirit which has long been fomenting and agitating society. We are amazed at the delusion, as well as the wickedness of our fellow-citizens ! What results can they expect from disorderly violence, which fills the friends of humanity with grief and dismay ? If an exasperated mob is allowed to supersede the laws—if vengeance may take the place of justice—if unpopular persons or establishments may be destroyed without trial, or jury, or judge, there is an end of our civil and religious freedom. Every observer of the “ signs of the time ” has perceived a vehement tendency to the reign of will and passion, instead of the government of law and reason. If this wild spirit of anarchy and misrule should continue and increase, the laws can derive no efficiency from public regard ; all veneration for authority and right will be done away ; and our cherished institutions,

whose deep foundations are laid in the supposed virtue and wisdom of the people, must perish in the general wreck of liberty, order, and social justice. I am afraid of the downward tendency of the public mind. The multitude seem to be driven about by fierce passions; and demagogues enough are found to inflame and mislead them. "The land is full of idols." The laws and principles which bind together the elements of society, are falling into contempt and reproach. Many of our fellow-citizens, otherwise virtuous and estimable, are coming under the influence of a wild and absurd political fanaticism, fatal equally to the security of private rights and of public tranquillity.

I am afraid of the direction which public sentiment is taking. It no longer comes up in its majesty to the support of law and justice, and the institutions of the country. It "goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking what it may destroy." In plain terms, we are in imminent danger of falling under the dominion of a frantic mob which may destroy more in a short period of its fury, than the wisdom of ages can repair. The public mind is grievously abused by designing persons who have purposes of their own to accomplish. By popular publications and harangues, full of specious phrases and plausible theories, many uneducated men are alienated from the laws and institutions of the country; and filled with discontent at grievances which have no existence, and with a longing after change which has no object. There has been a system of efforts to create jealousy and enmity between different classes of society, which God and nature have bound up together by mutual sympathies, obligations and benefits. You are told, my friends,

again and again, until you almost believe that there is some foundation for what is so confidently and vehemently asserted—that the laws are made for the benefit of the rich, and the oppression of the laboring classes! But what laws are these? Among all the vague generalities which you hear, no one points out to you *any particular law*, that hurts your interests or impairs your rights. If you can find one of this character, you may confidently demand its repeal, and it will be repealed. If there are such laws, they may be distinctly stated—their oppressive operation may be shown. But is this done? No man is above the law—the feeble may plead his cause against the most powerful oppressor—the persecuted against the most influential accuser; and the law allows him able counsel and a jury of his equals, whose sympathy and sense of justice are his protection against wrong. Is there hardship in this provision? Does the laborer find any thing oppressive in the law which compels the greatest in the land to pay him, to the uttermost farthing, the wages of his toil? What class of society is injured by institutions, that protect the savings of the prudent, the earnings of the industrious, the possessions of the wealthy, and the rights, the liberties, and lives of all? All the property in the state is taxed for the support of public schools—the rich pay largely for what they do not want; that we, who are poor, may have instruction for which we could not pay. Is then any hardship, felt or imagined, in this provision? Was it made for the benefit of the opulent, and the oppression of the needy? I am persuaded that a great part of this discontent has arisen from the errors of ignorant men, and the sophistries of designing men. Ill-founded as it is, it

has long been cherished in the public mind, gradually wearing away its ancient respect for the laws and institutions of the country, and preparing it for the recent manifestations of violence and insubordination which have filled the community with agitation and dismay.

I have spoken of despotism as the dominion of human will, whether the will of one or of many. There can be no security under it. It may be governed by caprice or by passion—it may be changeable—it may be merciless. But thanks to the God of our fathers, we yet live under a government of written laws and constitutions. These are general rules, founded on the principles of eternal justice, gathered up by the deliberate wisdom of a nation—with no foreknowledge of the particular individuals who are to feel their operation. They are not like the will of living man, at the mercy of present excitements, and changeable circumstances—they have no feelings to gratify, no interests to serve, no partialities to bias them. The sanctity of these laws, while these exist, or of others when they are repealed, is our only security. What other power, under Divine Providence, can guard our possessions from the ruffian grasp of the spoiler—our dwellings from the midnight incendiary—our lives from the ruthless assassin? What but laws, held in reverence by a virtuous community, can spread an invisible shield over the habitations of the lonely and defenceless, and render them as secure as if a cordon of the heavenly host were encamped around them? What but the law can protect the weak from the violence of the strong, the poor from the extortions of the rich, and the lowly from the oppressions of the

powerful? In short, what but law, can secure to labor its hire, to frugality its savings, and to weariness a repose unbroken by the fear of midnight outrage?

The laws of our country deserve our respect, for they are designed to secure equal justice to all men. None are so low as to be beneath their regard—none are so high as to be able to defy their power. They are so mild that they lay upon personal freedom the least possible restraint that is consistent with public order and private safety. But this very mildness makes it necessary that they should derive their support and efficiency from public opinion. Laws are to us, what “kings and governors” were to the early Christians—“the powers that be”—we acknowledge no other powers,—and they are powers of our own creating. While these ordinances of man have legitimate authority over us, it is our duty to obey them, “as free, and not using our liberty as a cloak for maliciousness, but as servants of God.” The peculiar character of our civil institutions adds greatly to the force of our obligation to “lead quiet and peaceable lives under them.” They are virtually made by ourselves and for ourselves. We can revoke or change them by the constituted organs of the public will whenever they do not answer the beneficent purpose for which they were designed. If, instead of the “punishment or restraint of evil doers,” they become the oppression of good citizens, let them speak out in the majesty of public justice, and the call for reform must and will be obeyed.

But I tremble for my country when the laws which protect the most sacred rights of the defenceless—their property, their persons, their dwellings, are



wantonly trampled upon. I am ashamed of my country, when midnight incendiaries can deliberately go to their remorseless work of destruction, in the presence of thousands of spectators, and no hand is put forth to arrest the doers of outrage and sin; and no voice is raised to assert the majesty of the laws, or the rights of the injured. I am most deeply ashamed of the community in which Providence has cast my own lot, when I see so many—in the open face of day,—in the presence of the Almighty God by whom they are to be judged—coolly refuse\* to express their disapprobation of one of the foulest crimes that ever disgraced humanity! “O my God lay not this sin to their charge—let them not eat the fruit of their doings.”

I cannot,—I will not believe, that the guilt in which so many shared is so atrocious as it seems. The wrong-doers must have been under some strange delusion. Many had been wrought up to an intense and angry excitement by oft-told tales of dark and mysterious crime, perpetrated within the walls of an

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\* As a report has been circulated that the inhabitants of this town approve of the late outrages in Charlestown, and as the language of the above paragraph might seem to confirm such a report, it is no more than justice to declare that I do not know a single individual who justifies the burning of the Ursuline Convent. A town meeting was called soon after this occurrence; but a majority of the people were unwilling, for some reasons, to have any public action on the subject. Accordingly they attended the meeting with a predetermination to dissolve it without hearing any resolutions or doing any business. Unhappily for the reputation of the town, the meeting was dissolved, and the opportunity for repelling the reproach was lost. It is true that the prejudices of many against the Convent were so strong, that they are unable to feel much sorrow that it no longer exists; but from a pretty intimate knowledge of opinion here, I have no hesitation in affirming that they detest the act of outrage by which it was destroyed. To those who know the state of feeling in this town, the language of this discourse is believed to be sufficiently explicit; but as a copy of it might fall into other hands, this explanation seems necessary to prevent misunderstanding.

unpopular institution—tales which savored of the manners of the middle ages, more than of those of our country and times. These stories no doubt have been handed down from a period before the reformation, and fastened upon the unhappy convent. They are proved to have been unfounded—but had they been true—had the institution been as wicked as its worst foes believed it to be, no appeal to violence could have been necessary or justifiable. The laws of the land would have afforded a prompt and sufficient remedy. No citizens must be punished without a fair trial,—no trial of any kind was allowed.

The minds of others had been inflamed by needless apprehensions of the incoming of the Catholic faith, with the domination of the pope, and the reign of “priestcraft” and all manner of principles subversive of our civil liberties. The danger seems to be chimerical. But suppose it as real and fearful as excited imagination could make it—is this a proper manifestation of protestant zeal—to break open, plunder, and destroy a house consecrated to religion in any of its forms? Is this the manifestation of a Christian spirit—to drive out from their beds and burning habitation—upon the damps and darkness of night, with insult and outrage—helpless women and children, convulsed with agonies of fear? Were they men with the common sympathies of humanity, or were they fiends in the shapes of men, who, prowling around by the light of the conflagration they had kindled up, in search of *more* plunder and *more* objects of outrage—remorselessly violating the sanctity of the tomb, burst open the last receptacles of mortality, and tossed about with unholy hands, the mouldering remnants of the dead?

We are not called upon, my friends, to approve the doctrines or practices of the Roman church, or to aid or countenance its institutions; we may be unwilling to have its seminaries established among us, but can any Christian, can any good citizen, can any man of common humanity hesitate to declare his deep abhorrence of such deeds of darkness and sin? I am no disciple of the Catholic faith—no lover of creeds, or confessions, or convents; but while God gives me a voice to speak, I will raise it, for the supremacy of the laws which protect the equal rights of all men against lawless force. I will raise it to declare His displeasure against the outrages of infuriate mobs, whatever be the objects of their wrath.

Our constitution confers equal rights upon every denomination of Christians. Are you weary of this liberal provision? Do you wish to introduce a Protestant inquisition; to establish a religion by law—crush all dissenters from the legal faith, and bring back the age of persecution for opinion? If this is your wish, then let public sentiment speak out. Alter the constitution, which secures religious liberty to all—hedge round the “legal church” with penalties. Let the sword, the rack, the flames, again be made the potent arguments for Christian truth! But while we have equal laws, let not ruffian violence assail the rights which the laws are made to defend! Are you tired of these equal rights—are you impatient of toleration? Consider the price at which you would give them up. When one obnoxious sect is destroyed; when the right of the strongest only is regarded, to whom shall be given the dominion over the mind and conscience. Who shall be trusted to think for the rest, to define truth, to make trammels for faith,

to prescribe forms of worship ? “ The strong man armed may for a time keep his house, but who shall defend him when a stronger comes ? ” The spoiler may exult in his victory to-day, but what is his protection against a mightier spoiler to-morrow ? What could protect him but the very laws which he has insulted, dishonored and “ rendered of none effect ? ”

On this subject I cannot forbear to quote the sentiments of the most distinguished and powerful opponent of the Roman Catholics in this country. And I do it the more willingly as it is an act of justice to one who has been accused of exciting the multitude to acts of outrage, by his discourses against the doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome. I mean the Rev. Dr. Beecher. Like an open and generous enemy, he gives his views of the manner in which the Roman Catholics should be treated in this country. “ He began by regretting the late unhappy occurrence, and deprecated the use of physical force and the wanton destruction of property, both as a measure of policy and justice. He contended that the Catholics should be treated with kindness and affection, that they should have full liberty to found and endow institutions, erect churches, and use all lawful means to propagate their faith, and make proselytes. They might convert him if they could. He wished to have free inquiry and free discussion. He would admit the Catholics to a free participation in all secular employments, and religious, literary, and political privileges. He wished them to come among us and assimilate with our people, mingling as the rain drops mingle in the ocean. He would not put a straw in the way of their having free and equal rights and privileges.

But while he accorded them *their* rights, he would not give up *our own*. He would freely canvass the history and tendency of the Roman Catholic Church, relate the history of their persecutions, show what Romanism had been, and prove what they dared not deny, that it was the same *now*, only the policy was changed in this country. He would also make public their doings, and the plan proposed to convert this whole nation to the use of his holiness the Pope. This we believe to be the true and right ground; let all good citizens set their face against mobs; however odious Nunneries may be in a republican country, the law alone must take cognizance of them. A free, independent, and candid discussion we must have. As Dr. B. observed, whoever publishes a book, lays it before the public, and the contents are a fair matter of criticism. Whoever comes here to establish a new religion, must expect to have that religion pass through the ordeal of public opinion, and to have all its tendencies and principles bared to the light.

“Let the pulpit and the press be unchained and free, and let us all rally around the law, and protect all and every denomination in the peaceable enjoyment of their rights.”

Such are the only weapons which a Christian opponent is at liberty to use. “The weapons of this warfare are not carnal.” They are truth and reason, set for the defence of a pure faith, and they can derive no aid from unprincipled violence. “They are alone mighty to the pulling down of strong holds.”

My friends, the great question now before this country is not about the propriety of destroying a

convent and a few churches and dwelling-houses. The vital question is whether we shall continue to "live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty" under the sheltering power of laws; or whether we shall be left, each to his own miserable resources, for defence against the unbridled will of lawless mobs, until some mighty leader of mobs shall arise and restore quiet by the terrors of a military domination, an armed police and an all-searching inquisition into the conversation and actions of private life. What is a man alone and unaided, amidst the turmoil of millions, each living for himself? A unit lost in the immense sum of existence. A drop, swallowed up in the ocean of humanity. A helpless insect, trampled down and crushed by the on-rushing and self-regarding multitude. It is only by the laws, which are the bonds of social life, that the feeble become strong; it is under their covering-shield only, that we can enjoy our rights, our liberties and the just reward of our labors. And it is only when these laws are sustained in their venerableness and power by an enlightened and virtuous public opinion, that we can know the blessing of mental tranquillity and "sit under our vine and fig-tree, having none to molest or make us afraid."

These are plain truths, very plain—unquestioned and unquestionable. And they are as practical as they are plain. They speak with a trumpet-call to every good citizen to rally around the standard of public authority and maintain the supremacy of the laws, which protect the equal rights of all men. Let us not shrink from this duty, lest we seem to countenance the workers of iniquity. The times are fearful, corruption is clothing itself with new power

and is making giant-strides over the land. Delusion and madness follow at his heels. Anarchy and ruffian riot have begun the work of havoc and desolation, which can be stayed only by a firm and united stand of all the friends of social order and human rights. If any man has a sound principle in him, now is the time to declare it, firmly—with the sincerity of an honest man—with the courage of a martyr. Let no coward fear for his ease or popularity make him hesitate to seize every opportunity to vindicate the right, and do all in his power to reform and elevate public sentiment. Let him give the whole weight of his character and influence, undivided and unimpaired, to the cause of social order, law, and virtue. And let not despair of the destinies of man paralyze his exertions. Let each of us resolve, with the fearless spirit of a Christian and a patriot, that if all other men shrink from their duty, *I will never shrink from mine*. He who stands forth alone—a witness for truth—an advocate for righteousness, is himself a host—“he is strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.” In times like these every honest man has a mission to fulfil—he is an apostle of truth. Let him not despair of its success—it will never perish, though he should become a martyr in its cause. Not one magnanimous effort made—or one sound principle uttered for virtue, humanity or religion can ever be lost. It may spring up and bear fruit in many minds, after the excitement that maddened them, or the delusion that blinded them has passed away forever.













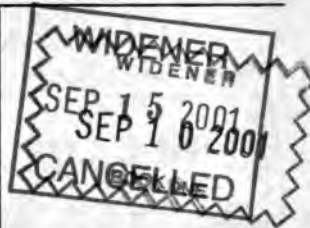
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